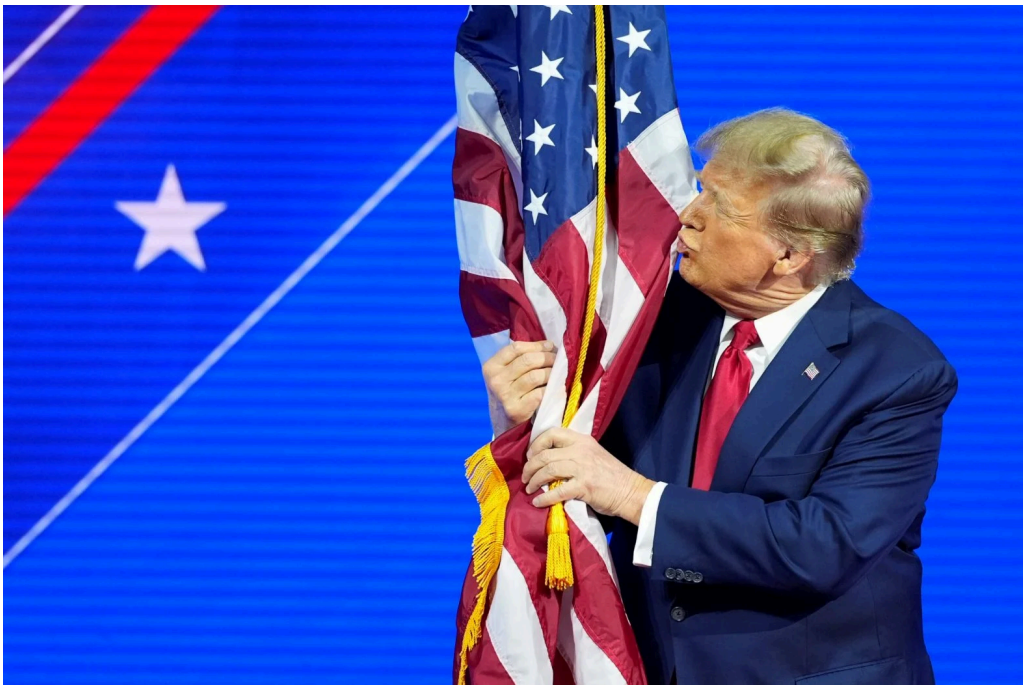
Trump Wins South Carolina Primary, Haley Outperforms Polls

February 25, 2024 **by Dan McCue**



Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump hugs and kisses the American flag as he speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, CPAC 2024, at National Harbor, in Oxon Hill, Md., Saturday, Feb. 24, 2024. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

CHARLESTON, S.C. — Former President Donald Trump soundly defeated former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley in the state Republican presidential primary on Saturday, but she vowed to fight on and planned to be in Michigan, the next state going to the polls, on Sunday.

In the end, after months of polls that predicted Trump would win by a 2-1 margin, the former president garnered 59.79% of the vote, according to the unofficial returns, compared to Haley's 39.52%.

The actual number of votes, again unofficially, was 451,905 for Trump compared with 298,674 for Haley.

(The vote won't be formally certified until Thursday.)

In all, a record 756,922 of South Carolina's 3,242,898 registered voters cast ballots in Saturday's contests, a voter turnout of 23.34%. By comparison, only 132,057 voters participated in South Carolina's Democratic primary earlier this month, the turnout an anemic 4.08%.

Attendees at Trump's victory party at the state fairgrounds in Columbia immediately seized on the results as proof that the former president will undoubtedly be the party's nominee come convention time and will square off against President Joe Biden in a rematch of the 2020 election next fall.

"There's never been a spirit like this, and I just want to say that," Trump said as he took the stage at the fairgrounds almost immediately after the polls closed.

"I have never seen the Republican Party so unified," he declared.

For Trump, who campaigned sporadically in South Carolina between court appearances, the victory is a signal moment. In all but one instance, every winner of South Carolina's Republican presidential primary since 1980 has gone on to be the party's nominee.

But Haley appeared to be unbowed as she addressed supporters at the Charleston Place Hotel Saturday night.

"I'm an accountant. I know 40% is not 50%. But I also know 40% is not some tiny group," she told a crowded ballroom of supporters.

"There are huge

Former S.C. Gov. Nikki Haley addresses supporters at Patriot's Point in Mount Pleasant, S.C. Friday night. (Photo by Dan McCue)

numbers of voters in our Republican primaries who are saying they want an alternative," she added.

For Haley, the loss was something to which she was unaccustomed. Over the course of five elections — three for a seat in the Statehouse and two for governor — she had never lost a race in South Carolina.

But where Haley did well on Saturday, she did very well.

In Charleston County, for instance, Haley received 61.71% of the vote, compared to Trump's 37.72%. In Beaufort County, she garnered 55.43% of the vote to his 43.88% and in Richland County, home to the state capitol, she received 57.70% of the vote to Trump's 41.41%.

Where she faltered was in counties like her home county of Lexington and in York County, considered a suburb of Charlotte,

North Carolina, which prognosticators said she absolutely had to win in order to have a path to victory in the state.

Trump's greatest margins of victory Saturday were in South Carolina's many rural counties in which he repeatedly trounced Haley by as much as 50 percentage points.

Despite the outcome, Haley said she was "grateful" to South Carolina.

"I always have been and always will be," she said, adding, "And I'm grateful that today is not the end of our story."

Trump Campaign Intensified As Primary Day Approached

In the final days before the vote, the Haley campaign kept up its steady appeal to South Carolina voters.

While the candidate herself continued a multi-community tour of the state aboard her campaign bus, the "Beast of the South," volunteers fanned out to get out the vote and her campaign spot played again and again on television.

Her efforts came to a head on Patriot's Point in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, where between 1,200 and 1,400 people showed up to hear her final pitch for their support.

As it turned out, most attendees were already in the Haley camp, as evidenced by the large number of people wearing "I pick Nikki" stickers on their lapels, and the large group of ladies who turned out in pick cowboy hats and feather boas, and rang pink cowbells to punctuate the candidate's remarks.

Rob and Caitlin, a father and daughter from Mount Pleasant, were typical of many attendees — excited to be at the event and

maybe
a tad

Donald Trump Jr. addresses his father's supporters at The Citadel in Charleston, S.C. (Photo by Dan McCue)

overwhelmed by the exuberance of those all around them.

Asked why he'd come, Rob cited Haley's "excellent back story."

"She was a governor I liked. I like what she represents. She's an excellent example of what women can do and what a girl can become," he said.

Caitlin, who was attending her first-ever political event, added, "I'm excited to be here. It seems like a really big deal. I'm sure I'm going to remember this for a long time."

Before the night was through, she'd pull a Haley campaign t-shirt over the one she'd had on when she arrived and even managed to procure one of the boas.

Both she and her father were emphatic in saying "she can't quit" the race, regardless of the outcome of the primary.

Also present was Sylvia Jeffries, of James Island, South Carolina, who acknowledged the "big challenge" ahead for Haley, but who

was also steadfast in her belief that the former governor and UN ambassador should stay in the race as long as possible.

Jeffries, a native of South Carolina, is an actress best known for her recurring roles on the HBO comedy series "Eastbound and Down" and the ABC drama "Nashville."

She is also the grand niece of Richard Manning Jefferies, a Democrat who served as the state's governor in the early 1940s.

"A lot has been made of the polls and Donald Trump's likely beating her in her home state, but the reality is, she's gotten a lot of pushback from our local South Carolina politicians," Jeffries said.

Rob and Caitlin, a father and daughter from Mount Pleasant, ahead of Nikki Haley's Patriots Point event the night before the primary. (Photo by Dan McCue)

"And the reason for that is she refused to play by the rules of the old boy's network after she was elected governor and she took state lawmakers to task when they tried to get one over on her," she said.

"Unfortunately, it's still an old boy's network here and they've been working hard against her," Jefferies continued. "Take it from me, I've been around this all my life — my father was mayor of a town in South Carolina."

Jefferies went on to say that despite everything she knew, she became a volunteer for Haley thinking the former governor had all the advantages in the race.

"She was a fantastic governor. She's strong. She's honest. She has dignity and grace and grit. But the reality is, the state Republican party has changed a lot," she said. "Now it's filled with people who claim she's not 'right' enough or that she's been bought by the Democrats.

Despite such claims, Jeffries said she continued to believe — "from my heart down to my toes" — that Haley was "the perfect person to bring people together to have them sit down and figure it out."

"We know what we need to do to protect our country," Haley said during her stump speech Friday night. "We know what we need to do domestically to get us back on track. Now we've got to figure out what we're going to do tomorrow, on primary day," Haley said. "Because this vote is where it all comes together."

"Americans keep telling us, in poll after poll, that they don't want a Trump-Biden rematch. More than 70% of Americans said they don't want a rematch, and 60% think that both men are too old to be president.

"Are we really prepared to say, at this point in time, that the best we can do is have two candidates in their 80s when you need someone that can put in eight years of hard work, day and night,

getting
the job
done for
the

Sylvia Jeffries, of James Island, South Carolina, shows off some of the items she brought along to the Haley rally at Patriots Point. (Photo by Dan McCue)

American people … no drama, no vendettas, just results?"

If the Haley campaign was steady-as-she-goes, the Trump campaign threw its efforts into another gear as the days before the vote dwindled down to a precious few.

The former president held two rallies in the last week of the campaign, and capped his personal efforts Friday night by appearing as keynote speaker at a gathering of the Black Conservative Federation in Columbia, South Carolina.

A number of surrogates also spoke in the state on Trump's behalf, including former Republican candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, and Trump family members Lara Trump and Donald Trump Jr.

Unlike Trump's events, which drew thousands, each of these events was held before decidedly smaller crowds.

Donald Trump Jr.'s event, for instance, was held in a conference room in the Altman Athletic Center at The Citadel on Friday

afternoon.

Introduced with a minimum of fanfare, the president's namesake spoke for about half an hour before a group of around 50 people.

During his remarks, Trump largely ignored Haley and set his critical sites on Biden, who he portrayed as a doddering old man — "his advisors hope he'll give them at least the appearance of lucidity, for even a few seconds, but then it wears off and it's like a deer in the headlights" — the mainstream media — "Is that true? Or did you hear it on CNN? Because those are two very different things" — and the prosecution of Jan. 6 defendants, one of whom, he said, "was sentenced to 17 years for shaking a fence."

Trump went on to suggest that

Signage outside Donald Trump's South Carolina campaign headquarters. (Photo by Dan McCue)

"incompetence" on the part of the current administration "may be why everything that's going on around the world is actually happening."

"Maybe, just maybe, because it is the nature of predation. Maybe it's because the evil people around the world seek weakness

exuded from the United States, and they decide to act accordingly," he said.

"Fortunately, we have a unique opportunity to change things and fix them," Trump said as many of his listeners nodded in agreement.

"I'm not even going to talk about [the primary vote] because the primaries are already over," he continued. "What's really unique is you actually have something that I haven't experienced in my lifetime — you've actually lived under the two likely candidates, Trump and Biden.

"Can anyone name a single metric, whether it's economic or otherwise, where we are better off today than we were four years ago? The answer is no," he said. "And it doesn't take a genius to figure this out."

"If you think things are going well, you've been living under a rock," Trump said. "But I promise you, we'll keep fighting for a better America as long as you keep fighting."

Early Call On a Day That Saw Haley Support Coalesce in the Lowcountry

The Associated Press called the race barely one minute after polls closed at 7 p.m. ET statewide, lending a somewhat surreal cast to the early evening.

At that time, not a single precinct in Charleston County had reported Saturday's results to the county's Board of Elections, which in turn, would report them to the state Election Commission.

At that point, the only votes that had been tallied in South Carolina's third most populous county were early and absentee ballots.

And these seemed a reverse mirror image to the

Haley supporters were far from subdued ahead of her final rally in South Carolina. (Photo by Dan McCue)

statewide tally that flashed across the large television screen.

According to the Charleston County Board of Elections, 63.71% or 13,531 of the early votes and those cast by absentee ballot went to Haley, while 35.87% or 7,618 votes went to Trump.

Earlier in the day, at the polling place set up inside the National Guard Armory on Mathis Ferry Road in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, long lines of voters were typical, though the wait to vote was often less than five minutes.

"There really has been a lot of interest in this particular primary," said Chloe Singleton, the retired marketing staffer at the Medical University of South Carolina who was serving as poll clerk — the person in charge — of the Armory voting location.

"It's only 11 a.m. and we've already had 465 out of 5,000 voters in the three precincts that vote at the location," she said. "So I'm expecting a big turnout today."

Singleton went on to say that because fewer than 5% of registered voters had cast their vote in the Democratic primary,

there was a lot of conjecture that many voters who lean Democratic or independent were "saving" their votes to "sway the outcome of this primary one way or another."

"Of course, there's no way to know who is who when they actually come in to vote. We just make sure the individual coming to the table here is registered to vote and that they are who they say they are," she said.

A few feet away from where Singleton was sitting was a row of voting machines.

"It's
really
just a
glorified

Donald Trump Jr. emphasizes a point during an appearance at The Citadel in Charleston, S.C. (Photo by Dan McCue)

printer," she said. "You print your choices there, but the machine doesn't register anything. Then you take your printed ballot to the scanner, the DS 200, and it scans the ballot, makes note of your vote, and there's a box in the bottom that collects all the ballots in case there's an audit or we need to do a hand count.

"I think it's a pretty good system," Singleton smiled.

She went on to explain that when an individual presents their photo ID to vote, the computer in front of her will indicate whether they'd already voted in the Democratic primary, or if they'd been sent an absentee ballot.

"If someone who was sent an absentee ballot insists on voting, they can do so with a provisional ballot," Singleton said.

"That will then be compared to the absentee ballot, and if we find the voter has actually voted twice, they'll be held liable," she said. "The fine can be anywhere from $1,000 to $5,000, plus 30 days in jail.

"And the same holds true for me and our poll workers. If we're found to be trying to influence how somebody votes, we're subject to the same penalties," she said.

Outside the Armory, the majority of voters who were willing to talk to The Well News indicated that they had voted for Nikki Haley.

"We need to stop Trump," said one woman hurrying to her car. A young couple, Jeff and Catherine of Mount Pleasant, said they turned out to vote because they both believed it was important "to have a voice in this election."

"I'm concerned about the way our country is going and I don't want Donald Trump to be the Republican nominee," Catherine said.

"That's the main reason we made sure to vote today," Jeff said. "We cannot bear the idea of Trump being up for president in the general election."

The most talkative of the voters leaving the armory was Nicholas "Nico" Sprotti, a Frenchman by birth who became an American

citizen
10 years
ago
after

Voters wait in line to cast their ballots at the National Guard Armory in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina Saturday morning, Feb 24. (Photo by Dan McCue)

marrying a native South Carolinian.

Asked what he thought was driving the heavy turnout in the precinct, Sprotti said "first of all, the weather is beautiful today, and as we all know, oftentimes, the outcome of an election is a function of how the weather turns out," he said.

"The other thing is, we are lucky here in South Carolina to be the fourth contest in the primary season, so we feel, as individual voters, that we can truly make an impact on the presidential election. You feel empowered," he said.

After Sprotti acknowledged he voted for Haley, he explained his decision by saying "I'm a very proud citizen and what I've learned is, you want to vote for the person that you'd most want to have a beer with … so I asked myself, 'Which one, of the three candidates, Biden, Trump or Haley, would it be?' And the answer was very easy. I'd rather have a beer with Nikki Haley, and I hope the whole country feels that way too."

The Vote Rolls In

About 15 minutes before the first poll clerk showed up at the Charleston County Board of Elections, a large gentleman with a megaphone stood up in the center of the room, surrounded by elections workers and long stretches of empty tables.

"Great work today. We only have a couple more hours to go," he said.

Chloe Singleton, poll clerk at the National Guard Armory in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Soon, poll clerks would be filing in, sometimes en masse, dropping off sealed canvas envelopes containing the electronic record of their precinct's vote, as well as the larger blue bins that contained the back-up paper record.

"The main thing is to make sure we're communicating," the man with the megaphone said. "When you're done with somebody, make sure you raise your hand so that we know you're ready to accept the next person."

Standing off to one side of the room, near the area cordoned off for news photographers and television crews, Matt Dillane, communications manager for the board of elections, took in the scene.

"I think the biggest thing about both the Democratic and Republican primaries this year was making sure that we could secure all the [polling] locations," he said.

"Traditionally, our elections are on Tuesday, and our usual locations are free on Tuesdays. This year, both parties opted to have their primaries on Saturday, and that proved challenging – or at least required extra planning – because a lot of the places we use for elections, schools, school gymnasiums, libraries … might have events on Saturdays," he said.

As the blue boxes began to arrive, Dillane

Voters picking their preferences in the S.C. Republican Presidential Primary. (Photo by Dan McCue)

explained that the paper ballots were the same ballots voters had scanned before they left their polling places.

"So we don't have to count them when they come in the door here, but we do keep in just in case we have an audit – because we do random audits in South Carolina – or if we need to do a recount for any reason … say if the margins are close enough," he said.

Asked when the county results would be reported to the state Elections Commission and then flashed on television screens across the nation and around the world, Dillane said the process occurred "fairly quickly."

"One of the things in the envelope that the poll clerks bring in is a flash drive," he said. "Every voting machine has a flash drive keeping a tally on the back. So we take that flash drive, plug it in, copy the data, and it's off to Columbia [and the Elections Commission] before you know it.

"Now, as for how quickly the state reports the results to the media, and what their processes are, I can't say. But honestly, probably the most time-consuming part of the process is the drive from the individual polling place to here," Dillane.

"Once they get here, the results go up pretty quickly," he said.

Primary Politics Not As Rough This Year

In the lead-up to the Republican primary one consistent theme people touched on was that the race didn't seem like former legendary contests; that somehow presidential politics in South Carolina didn't live up to its bare-knuckled reputation this time around.

Gibbs Knotts, chair of the Department of Political Science at the College of Charleston and co-author of "First In The South: Why South Carolina's Presidential Primary Matters," said while Trump had dismissed Haley as a "birdbrain" and raised questions about the whereabouts of her husband Michael, who is deployed in Africa with National Guard, he agreed that the rough-and-tumble was missing from the race this year.

"I would attribute it to the lack of competitiveness. Biden and Trump both have huge leads," Knotts said.

Asked why Haley never gained real traction in the race, despite her

The day's votes begin to trickle in at the Charleston County Board of Elections. (Photo by Dan McCue)

popularity as governor, Knotts said he and his "First in the South" co-author, Jordan Ragusa, found evidence "that endorsements matter, and Trump had the governor, both U.S. senators and five of the six GOP House members in his corner."

"It's also been a decade since Haley has been on the ballot and the electorate has changed," he said. "The primary change is the emergence of MAGA Republicans and a strong loyalty to Trump. In essence, the outcome of this primary is an indication that the Trump takeover of the national party has occurred here in the state as well."

Asked what that might mean to Haley's prospects going forward, Knotts said, "South Carolina has always been a good predictor of the electoral outcome in other southern states, many of which hold primaries on Super Tuesday. I don't expect that to change in 2024."

Former South Carolina Gov. James Hodges, a Democrat, said he too had heard the talk of this year's primary being somewhat

languid compared to years past.

"It probably has something to do with the clear outcomes in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada, along with the polling margins in South Carolina," he said.

"Trump clearly has an incredibly strong hold on rural and non-college educated White

Poll clerks return materials to the Charleston County Board of Elections. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Republican voters that no one has been able to break. And we have a lot of those voters in South Carolina," Hodges said.

"Hence the efforts by the Haley campaign to cobble together a strong showing with college- educated Republicans, with independent and Democratic voters who didn't vote in the Democratic Primary a few weeks back to help close that gap.

"She was going to need to beat the expectations game here to put any pressure on Trump, and that was a tall order," Hodges said. "In a sense, she was a bit like a Democrat running for statewide election here.

"There just wasn't enough of an audience open to hearing her message in the Republican primary, regardless of her message,"

he said.

Despite the relative lack of the sensational in the run-up to this year's primary, Ralph Norman, R-S.C., who appeared with Haley several times, nevertheless said he thought presidential campaigning was plenty rough no matter how it seemed from the outside.

"It's a blood sport," he told The Well News shortly before Haley's final South Carolina campaign event on Friday night. "Words fly out at you from every direction and every description. Fortunately, Nikki does not take this personally."